LETTER

OF THE

PRESIDENT OF THE BOARD.

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OFFICE OF THE BOARD OF HEALTH,
No. 12 POLICE BUILDING,
NEW HAVEN, CONN., March 22, 1884.

To the Honorable Court of Common Council of the City of New Haven:

GENTLEMEN:—I herewith present to your Honorable Body the annual reports made to and accepted by this Board, by the Health Officer and the Clerk, with statements and papers pertaining to the work of the Board of Health for the year 1883.

In presenting these reports and papers, I wish at the same time to emphasize some of the facts they present, that you may the better co-operate with this Board in its special work, which is so closely connected with the good name and prosperity of our City.

New Haven is especially favored in its natural conditions and advantages, which make it easier here than in most cities to avoid many calamities which destroy property and life, and thus interfere with its material prosperity. The soil and climate are, by nature, favorable to health and long life, and the situation of the town is such that we are peculiarly exempt from the loss of property by the accidents of fire and flood. These very advantages retard sanitary reform, particularly in these matters, which are incident to any rapidly growing city. Escape from severe

pestilence in the past creates a false security in the public mind as to the future, and without a pestilence or unusual sickness changes are apt to be deferred.

It is a law of Nature that as the population of a city becomes larger, and the occupation of the soil denser, that sickness and death increases faster than the population does; and in all previous centuries this has checked the rapid growth of cities and prevented their attaining a size such as we now see. It is the part of sanitary science to lessen this difference in health and life between large and small places.

This City, as a whole, continues to have a low death rate, but I am convinced that it is within our power to make it still lower, and for some parts of the City very much lower, if we have your aid and co-operation to the extent which public opinion will now justify and sustain.

That the death rate of the City is now considerably lower than it would be, were it not for the work of the Board of Health, no one will deny who studies the facts. To lower the death rate in any community, is as truly saving life in that community as if persons were rescued from burning buildings. It is as truly the duty of the City authorities to do their best to protect its citizens from death by preventable disease as from death by preventable fire, and to save the property of its citizens from being wasted by preventable sickness, as from being wasted by burning up.

In either case the official authority is powerless unless backed by popular intelligence and supported by public opinion. A growing community too ignorant to see the value of fire engines or too stingy to buy them, as the town becomes a village and the village a city, must expect to have its growth checked by frequent fires, and at last, when the buildings become close enough, a sweeping calamity by a big fire. In a precisely similar way, a growing city which will not provide against the increasing dangers to health incident to a denser population, must as surely suffer an increasing amount of sickness and death, and from time to time expect the calamity of an epidemic. As a matter of fact, a serious epidemic of disease in a city

is now more damaging to its business and its prosperity than a great fire. Each of you can call to mind specific examples of this fact which have occurred within the last dozen years. It often happens that the popular interest in a community is not awakened to the importance of protecting the public health until a pestilence comes, and that only then it provides the means for efficient official action. Cases might be cited where a pestilence has proved a blessing in the end by scaring the people into measures for promoting the public health and thus greatly lessening sickness, lowering the death rate, and educating the people into living more cleanly lives.

During the last few years there has been in this community a great growth in intelligence in matters pertaining to sanitary science, and a great change in public opinion as to the advisability of certain measures intended to promote the public health of the City, until now I believe that public sentiment is in advance of official action.

Sewers are a recognized necessity in a modern city and their chief office is to carry off the impurities generated within the houses, especially within dwellings. This filth, called *sewage*, if left to rot in the houses or on the premises near, is so very poisonous and productive of death that its removal in some way is a necessity for the health and prosperity of every city. Because of this necessity sewers are built and maintained at public expense and continue under official supervision and control.

But an essential part of the sewer system of any city enters the houses, and in most modern houses becomes a part of their construction. If this plumbing and house-draining is badly done it becomes a curse instead of a blessing; instead of purifying the house, it poisons it, and instead of promoting health, it brings disease and death. Plumbing and house drainage is an integral part of the sewer system, and as such it should be as truly under a general official supervision as the sewers themselves. Many, and perhaps most large cities, now have plumbing and house-drainage ordinances and proper officials to attend to this business. In the experience of this Board we have frequent and

ample proof that such action is sadly needed here, and as a Board, or through its members and officers, have often asked for it, as our printed reports for the last nine years show. Not a year passes that we do not see lives lost because of the lack of such regulation, which lives we believe might have been saved.

Plumbing and house-draining should be as truly a matter for official inspection and control, both as to the plan and the honesty of the work, as the storage of ashes or the material and thickness of walls. There is the same necessity for such laws as for fire laws. Our fire laws are wisely planned and efficiently administered, and I believe that now the time has come when public sentiment demands also plumbing and house-drainage laws.

The ashes on our premises must be kept according to certain legal restrictions, public officials enter our houses to see that the law is obeyed, and our own and our neighbors' property not thus endangered by fire ; but there is a hundred times as much loss caused by sickness from bad house-drainage as from fire from faulty ash-bins. For the public safety we have ordinances directing that the walls of buildings shall be of suitable material and strength ; we have no law controlling house-drainage, although a hundred lives are lost in our City because of faulty drainage to one because of faulty walls.

Suppose that a tenement house in this City was on fire, its inmates in danger, and the physical means of saving their lives were simple and at hand ; but the firemen had neither the legal right nor the legal power to use them. If but a single life was lost, laws would soon be made to suit similar emergencies in the future. Or suppose the firemen were legally prevented from using such methods as they knew had been effective elsewhere, and the victims left to helplessly perish, how long would it be before the cruel laws would be repealed.

Yet, every year, we see many lives lost, not only in tenement houses, but also in the houses of well-to-do citizens, from diseases induced or aggravated by bad plumbing, faulty drainage, or other preventable causes, which lives

might have been saved were the people as wise and alert in sanitary matters as in that of fire, and public opinion as earnest in maintaining organized protection against the one class of dangers as against the other.

Within the past year, the proper City authorities, directed by law (and sustained by public opinion), have compelled the extensive erection of fire-escapes on many buildings, often at a considerable cost to the owners, although (so far as I can learn) there has never yet in this City been a single life lost at fires where the victim was not at fault and a fire-escape on the building would have saved the life.

But every year lives are lost that might have been saved by even less official care and private expense than the cost of the fire escapes, if rightly directed towards the sanitary appliances, some of them in the very buildings on which the law (and popular demand) has compelled these fire-escapes to be placed. Now that we have the one protection, let us have the other.

The landlord of the tenement house is compelled, by law, to guard against certain dangers to the lives of his tenants from the occasional and accidental fire; but the law still allows the landlord to constantly endanger the life of the same tenant in that same house by such unsanitary conditions that he is sometimes killed as the natural result of such conditions, a remedy for which is as well understood, and no more expensive, than the remedies against dangers from fire. We want the authority and means to use these remedies.

Owners of theaters and other places where people congregate, are now compelled by law to provide ample means for persons to get out quickly if they even think they are in danger; but these same owners (if they so choose) can, within those same buildings, legally maintain conditions which cause a thousand times as many deaths in the country as panics.

We now want some of the legal safeguards erected against the danger of slow death by preventable disease, which are already provided against sudden death by accident. We

have guarded against the lesser causes of preventable death, now let us be equally earnest and enthusiastic in guarding against the greater danger, that from accumulated and accumulating filth.

We want a plumbing and house-drainage law, with the means of administering it.

A person is now prevented by law (and public sentiment sustains the law) from putting up wooden structures within fire limits, where such structures may endanger the property and peace of neighbors ; but the law allows (although public sentiment condemns) this same person to build a privy near his neighbor's windows and poison the air those neighbors must breathe, and to sink a cess-pool where it may poison his neighbors' soil and pollute their wells. He may not legally endanger the safety of his neighbor's house and depreciate its value by building a wooden structure near it, no matter how clean that structure may be ; but he may depreciate the value of the property of all his neighbors, and endanger their health and even life, by poisoning the air and soil and water of the neighborhood with privies and cess-pools.

We want a law forbidding the building of any privies or cess pools on sewered streets.

Our City is reasonably prosperous and real estate is rising in value, more particularly in those wards where the death rate is the lowest. Houses and homes are in the most demand in those localities deemed most healthy. It is the duty of the Board of Health to wage war against all forms of filth in the City, and to give such aid in this matter as is possible to those who are afflicted with untidy neighbors. We pray that your Honorable Body will co-operate with us in this, and *help us abolish the numerous hog-pens within the City limits.*

Many observers have called attention to the fact that several indications suggest that this will be a "cholera year." I think that public opinion now demands each of the three specific enactments asked for, and if we wait to be scared

into it by the actual advent of cholera or other pestilential disease, the people will justly blame the authorities they have chosen to watch over their interests. Each of these asked for enactments has now been delayed longer than has been either wise or for the best interests of the City.

Hoping and trusting that this Board may have the co-operation and aid here respectfully asked for, I am

Your obedient servant,

WM. H. BREWER,
President.